

Senator Lisa Brown

2004 End of Session Report



I want to hear from you!

Olympia Office:

332 John A. Cherberg Building
PO Box 40403
Olympia, WA 98504-0403
Phone: (360) 786-7604
Fax: (360) 786-1999

District Office:

35 W. Main, Suite 375
Spokane, WA 99201
Phone: (509) 456-2760

E-mail: brown_li@leg.wa.gov

Web Site: www.sdc.wa.gov/brown.htm

Toll-Free Legislative Hot Line:

(800) 562-6000
(800) 635-9993 (TTY)

Dear Neighbors,

Our 60-day legislative session is over, and I can't tell you how great it is to be back in Spokane. I'm sipping a cup of coffee at the Rocket Bakery as I write to you, reflecting on all the things that make our district a great place to live—not to mention represent in the state Senate.

While short, the session was not without substance. As Washington slowly retreats from its economic slump, there were fewer drastic cuts than last year and a good amount of investing—though not to the degree most Senate Democrats would have preferred. For instance, \$61 million of the \$145 million budget went toward K-12 education. Upon closer examination, however, only \$21 million is for enhancements or increases (the rest is for mandatory caseload adjustments). When Spokane Public Schools are facing an additional \$6 million cut—and risk losing teachers and increasing class sizes—I can only imagine what the situation is like in other districts. Our students and teachers deserve better.

Still, Spokane fared pretty well, considering it was a supplemental year and the majority of funding went toward costs we could not have predicted when we wrote the two-year budget last session.

The budget includes financial assistance for Spokane County child care providers, as well as funding for a study of the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie aquifer. Spokane's Riverpoint Campus will receive more than \$31 million for the construction of Washington State University's Riverpoint Academic Center. Eastern Washington University will get \$8 million for the renovation of Senior Hall.

Thanks to all of you who wrote, phoned, e-mailed and visited me in Olympia this session. Now that I'm home, please feel free to contact me at my district office with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Lisa Brown
State Senator
3rd Legislative District

Staff Update

I continue to work with wonderful staff, but there have been a couple of changes recently.

Amber Lewis, who used to work in my Spokane office, has moved on to a new position dealing with elections issues.

Replacing her is **Neil Beaver**, formerly of the Lands Council.

Ruthie Zimmer continues to work in my Olympia office.

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Health Care

Legislature makes important health care investments, has work left to accomplish next session

Good News

Raises for home health care workers: The Legislature approved 50-cent per-hour pay raises and health benefits for the state's home health care workers—including agency providers. These raises will help reduce turnover in these jobs and allow for high-quality care for the frail and elderly.

Health care premiums for kids rolled back: Last session the Legislature voted to impose monthly Medicaid premiums on children in low-income families who struggle to meet their most basic needs. Scheduled to take effect this year, the premiums would have resulted in as many as 20,000 children losing health coverage.

This session we were able to roll these unfair premiums back. Though I would have preferred the premiums to be completely abolished, the final budget eliminates the premium on the state's poorest children.

Bad News

Mental health parity stalls: I sponsored a bill that would have required all health plans regulated by the state to provide mental health services on the same basis as other health services. Unfortunately, the bill did not get through the Legislature.

Spokane Scoop

We're not immune to mental health issue:

A recent report in the *Spokesman-Review* revealed that more than 300,000 mentally ill people live in Washington. And as of Jan. 1, in Spokane County as many as 900 mentally ill people—one-third of the county's caseload—lost their coverage. That's why mental health parity will be one of my biggest priorities next session.

Children and Families

Local children come out winners in state budget

Good News

Health care for kids easier to afford: The long-term consequences of children losing health insurance are just too dire. This year we were successful in rolling back the health care premiums the Legislature approved last session.

Bad News

Farmers' Market Nutrition Program not funded:



Tillie Vuksich (right), a fan of the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, brought her baby, Rubin, down to Olympia and testified in favor of the bill.

This program provides fresh produce to low-income mothers and children. One of my biggest disappointments this session was not keeping money in the budget for it. (\$100,000, which would have drawn a federal match of \$233,000, had been in earlier versions of the budget, but fell out in the end.)

More than a dozen counties participate in the program—but Spokane County is the only one that pays to be

a part of it. Next session I'll be back fighting for this valuable program, which not only supports local farms, it helps ensure that women, infants and children have access to healthy food.

Spokane Scoop

Child care providers to get assistance:

High-quality child care opens the door to success in school and opportunity in life. Unfortunately, child care providers in our community are being priced out of business.

Last session I secured a proviso in the budget that would have granted an urban adjustment factor to child care providers in Spokane County. But no funds were budgeted for this financial assistance. This session I was able to get \$500,000 in the budget, which should help keep facilities in our area from closing.

Education

Improvements funded for higher ed; K-12 virtually ignored

Good News

Higher education enrollments: The final budget includes about \$17 million to fund close to 3,000 new enrollments in our state's higher education institutions. With classrooms becoming overcrowded, and courses harder to get into, this is good news for our future work force.

Bad News

LAP receives no new money: The Learning Assistance Program (LAP) provides help to students struggling to read and learn math. The governor's budget proposed an additional \$7 million for LAP, but no LAP money was in the Legislature's final budget.

The Riverpoint Academic Center, scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2006, will look like this.

Spokane Scoop

Riverpoint Academic Center, WSU-Spokane:

The capital budget includes \$31.6 million for the construction of the Riverpoint Academic Center, which will house the campus library, classrooms, student services and faculty offices.

Senior Hall, EWU: Senior Hall, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was built in 1920 and has received no major renovation since. The capital budget includes \$8 million to modernize the three-story building, creating an entry leading to a new atrium, and for exterior rehabilitation.



Environment

PBT, Spokane aquifer studies get money

Good News

PBT study OK'd: The budget includes \$325,000 to study Persistent Bioaccumulative Toxins, which build up in the food chain and are extremely toxic.

Bad News

Renewable energy bill dies: A bill that would have established a "portfolio" standard for utilities for energy efficiency and renewable energy did not pass the Legislature. It will likely be one of the biggest environmental priorities of the 2005 session.

Spokane Scoop

Aquifer study funded: I obtained \$100,000 in the budget to study the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie aquifer. This river, which flows underneath the Spokane River from Rathdrum Prairie in northern Idaho to Spokane, supplies drinking water to 400,000 people in both states. The study will help clarify how much water is in the aquifer.

Primary

New primary still subject to court challenges, initiatives

While nobody wanted to replace our state's beloved blanket primary, the courts declared it unconstitutional, and the Legislature was charged with coming up with a new primary. The most popular proposals were:

- **"Modified Montana" system:** Voters registered with a political party would receive their party's ballot, and unaffiliated voters could choose from three party ballots, but their choice would remain confidential. Party registration would be voluntary.
- **"Top-Two" system:** The top two vote-getters — regardless of party — to advance to the general election ballot.

The Legislature ended up passing an amended version "Top-Two" system. But the governor vetoed part of the bill so we ended up with a "Montana" system, which was my preference.

- **"Montana" system:** Voters may choose among candidates from a single party in partisan races and any person in non-partisan races. Choice is completely confidential and no party registration is required. Independent voters have a choice of any party on a year-to-year basis while maintaining their privacy by not being identified by either political party.

Last winter I asked you to tell me your preference for a replacement. Interestingly, you all overwhelmingly supported the Montana system.

